

Strawberry Blond

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by [hendollana](#)

Summary

Clay wonders if it would be different if George wasn't everything he'd ever dreamed of.

George smiles and has absolutely no idea that Clay is staring so he can memorise every line on George's face.

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or, Clay and George's neighbours think they're dating, they're not right, not matter how much Clay wishes they were.

Notes

i stole this idea from the fact me and my flatmate's neighbours literally think we're a cute little lesbian couple, and then i added feelings

yes the title is from mitski yes its that type of pining

(don't send to anyone, don't post anywhere else, ect ect)

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Clay sometimes thinks he's been in love with George from the moment he was born.

He knows that isn't possible, knows they were born on different continents, knows he didn't even meet George till he was eighteen and George twenty one. But still, Clay thinks he's loved George for as long as he knew what love is.

When Clay was a kid, love was cold, ice on his fingers when he picked up a football, his parents shouting from the bleachers. George changes that. George makes love late Friday nights watching shitty Netflix movies, quiet in sync breathing, with the heating all the way up.

They meet on a Monday, it's warm, and the Florida sun is shining down on George's hair. It looks soft, Clay thinks. He never stops wanting to run his fingers through George's hair. It's a Monday and George has a spare room in his apartment, and Clay already knows he's going to fall in love with the British man if he moves in. Clay wonders if he'll ever be able to go to the kitchen without wanting to kiss George.

Clay moves in on Tuesday.

"George?" Clay calls out as he enters their apartment, locking the door behind him.

"Yeah?"

Clay follows George's answer to the living room, sighing to himself a little when he sees the older man spread out on the sofa with a blanket pulled tight to his chest and reruns of Brooklyn Nine Nine playing softly from the TV.

Clay would do anything to walk over to George and press a kiss on his forehead, mumbling softly that he missed him. Instead, Clay dumps the grocery bags on the kitchen counter and tosses George the juice he bought him.

"Why the fuck did our downstairs neighbour just tell me that she loves, and I quote, 'the gays'?"

George snorts in response, laughing as he reaches over to pause the show, "The old lady from number three?"

"Yeah," Clay replies, grinning as he puts the pasta in the pantry, "It was so unprompted as well, like I passed her in the hall and she just said it."

"Oh my god," George laughs, Clay's heart pains at the sound, "Does she know you're bi?"

"I mean, I really don't see how she would." Clay ponders, shutting the cupboard and flopping down on the other couch opposite George.

"Maybe she saw you with that guy you snogged in the hall." George says slyly, yelling a little when Clay throws a pillow at him.

"That was like, two years ago, and it was *one* time."

It had been to try to get over George too, not that Clay's going to let that information slip. It hadn't worked anyway, the guy left and two hours later Clay was helping George with a college project and trying his hardest not to let his stomach sink every time they brushed hands.

“Hm,” George considers, “Weird, maybe she thought you were someone else?”

Clay rolls his eyes, “She’s old, George, not fucking senile.”

“Okay! Okay!” George smiles, hands in the air in surrender, “Who knows, maybe she really does just love the gays.”

“That makes two of us then.” Clay grins, feeling victorious when George lets out a bout of laughter.

It’s a half truth anyway. Clay only loves one person. And he’s not even gay.

George stretches a little, conversation over, and Clay hates himself for letting his gaze drift to the sliver of skin on show where his hoodie rides up. Fuck, Clay wants to wrap his hands around George’s waist and leave *marks*, leave bruises in the shape of hands and hickies and *mine, mine, mine*.

He probably needs to get laid.

Clay mentions it to Nick during class, hushed voices as they ignore the sound of the professor talking about java.

“That *is* weird.” Nick says, glancing at the whiteboard to pretend he’s paying attention.

“Right?” Clay exclaims, “Like she said it to me as if I should want to know she loves gay people, I mean, fucks sake, it’s the 21st century, it’s not something to feel special about.”

Nick hums in agreement, “What did George say?”

“Nothing really, just if she knew I’m bi.”

“And does she?” Nick replies, scratching lightly at his scruff.

“No, Jesus, why does everyone think I’m going about telling all my neighbours my sexuality.” Clay groans, and why do none of his friends not seem to be as curious about this as him.

“I don’t know dude, you do have that little bi pride pin on your denim jacket.”

“Okay true,” Clay agrees, “But I’ve only met this woman like, twice, and both times were summer so I was just in a t-shirt.”

Nick laughs suddenly, turning to Clay with a bright smile, “What if she thinks you and George are a couple?”

Him and George being a couple is a concept Clay had put a lot of thought into, but his neighbours thinking they’re dating, less so.

“Why the hell would she think that?”

“Do y’all not live in a converted apartment? I remember you saying your room used to be the kitchen.”

“Uh, yeah?”

“Okay, so your neighbours probably don’t know your apartment is now a two bedroom, because all theirs are one bedrooms.”

Oh. *Oh.*

Great, Clay thinks, not only does he have to deal with being hopelessly in love with his roommate slash best friend, but he also has to deal with his entire apartment block thinking he and George are a couple. If that doesn’t nail the head in Clay’s metaphorical coffin, he doesn’t know what will.

“Fucking fantastic.” Clay grumbles, sighing a little when Nick reaches over and pats his head.

“Oh, so no, ‘you’re a genius Nick! Thank you so much for solving this mystery, oh wonderful friend.’?”

Clay shoves Nick’s hand where it’s now rested on his shoulder, smiling when he talks, “You’re a genius Nick, but solve this one, how the fuck do I let the neighbours know me and George are not their honorary homosexual couple, and instead are a straight guy and his pining roommate?”

“Yeah, sorry bro, that one’s even beyond me.”

Clay groans, dropping his head onto the desk, he should have never answered the stupid ad on Facebook looking for a roommate.

Clay wonders if it would be different if George wasn’t everything he’d ever dreamed of.

George is late nights when Clay was twelve, hands shaking as he fills in an ‘am I gay?’ quiz, George is the first boy Clay kisses when he’s fifteen, smiles pressed together as seaside rain drips down their cheeks, George is the gay club Clay snuck into at seventeen, knees weak for the man kissing down his chest.

George is everything, and *more* .

Maybe it hurts most that George doesn’t even know. George smiles and has absolutely no idea that Clay is staring so he can memorise every line on George’s face, every curve of his lip, just in case it’s the last chance he has.

Like now, Clay muses, George is in the kitchen adjoined to their living room, dancing to a song by a British boy band whilst he stirs the chicken curry he’s making. George has no clue that Clay is using all his strength and self perseverance to not go up behind George and wrap his arms around the smaller man. George is so free, letting his socked feet slide along the wooden floor, and Clay feels trapped in a cage he constructed himself.

Clay doesn’t do that though, instead he sighs over dramatically and slams his laptop shut, closing his eyes as he leans back on the sofa.

“You okay?” George pipes up, lowering the volume flowing through the Alexa.

Clay cracks an eye open, and feels more annoyed when his breath stutters at the sight of George turning around to face Clay, concerned expression lacing his features and sleeves of a too big

hoodie pushed up to his elbows.

“Yeah,” Clay says, he lies to George an awful lot these days, “Got a thing due tonight. Didn’t even listen to the lecture.”

George tuts, turning the cooker down to simmer, “Just cause you’re smart doesn’t mean you don’t have to study.”

“Okay, I get it,” Clay smiles, “You’re doing a masters and are all knowing and powerful, my sincerest apologies, Georgie.”

George blushes a little, the way he always does when Clay compliments him, and smiles, it’s soft, and Clay wants to kiss it off his face.

“Can I help? Food won’t be ready for a while.” George asks, sincere in a way that Clay doesn’t think he could love more if he tried.

“Nah, dude,” Clay says, sitting up straighter on the sofa, “I’ll be fine, you know me, last minute for everything.”

“And yet you always get an A.”

George smiles fondly, opting to sit next to Clay instead of the free couch next to him. Clay briefly wonders if he’s in some devine test, if it’s a punishment to have George’s thigh three inches from him and not let his hand wrap around it.

“Hey,” Clay starts, trying to discreetly move his shoulders so they’re not in the danger zone of touching George’s, “Nick figured out the gay neighbour thing.”

“That we’re the gay neighbours?” George laughs, “I could have told you that.”

“We? Last time I checked, you were straight.”

George looks uncomfortable for a second, the same way he does when he hears Clay’s Tinder ping a notification, as if there’s an itching underneath his skin. Clay doesn’t focus on it too much, he can’t, he won’t. He refuses to listen to the voice in his head that sounds suspiciously like a Texan accent telling him George is too complex to be taken at face value. Clay knows he can’t get his hopes up.

“Yeah, um,” George speaks, voice unsure before he clears his throat, “For real though, what did Nick figure?”

“They think we’re dating.”

“Oh.” George breathes, and Clay wonders if he should have lied. If George is disgusted at the idea, if George sees Clay and thinks of ice curling around his fingers.

“Yeah, just because all the other apartments are one bedroom, so they probably think ours is too, right?” Clay hurriedly explains, hating the way George is just staring at the gently cooking pan on the stove.

“Yeah, makes sense,” George says softly, turning to face Clay with a shy smile, “Do you mind?”

George is blushing, that’s not uncommon. George blushes when Clay reaches behind him to grab something from the top shelf, George blushes when Nick tries to set him up with one of his friends,

George blushes a lot.

What is uncommon is the uncertainty in his voice.

“Do I mind?” Clay clarifies, continuing when George nods, “Why would I mind? Do *you* mind?”

George has every right to mind, Clay thinks. It’s probably awkward for him, having your neighbours think he’s in a relationship with a guy he’s not even into.

“No!” George says quickly, “I mean, no, it’s fine. No harm in it, I guess.”

“Yeah, no harm.” Clay mutters back, probably failing to mask his bitter tone.

There is harm, there’s going to be harm every time George waves goodbye as he slinks into his bedroom at two in the morning, leaving Clay to go into his own and scream into his pillows. There’s harm every time Clay’s mom phones him, asking how George is and if Clay’s seeing anyone and he doesn’t know how to explain that George and seeing anyone are one in the same.

There's always harm when you're in love.

The next time it happens, Clay is lugging a PC case up the three flights of stairs to their apartment, because the stupid elevator is broken and landlords are useless.

“Hey, dude.”

Clay hears from behind him as he’s turning the corner to go up the last set of stairs. He sends a quick prayer to the God of patience, and turns around with a fake customer service smile to be faced with their other downstairs neighbour, Toby.

Toby’s nice, he really is, he’s decent to talk with and he once let Clay and George borrow a bottle of Smirnoff. Clay is just really not in the mood right now.

“Yeah?” Clay replies, switching the case to his other arm.

“I just wanted to say, uh, me and my girl, we’re friends with this couple,” Toby speaks, looking like he’s trying too hard to get the words out, “They’re both girls, um, they’re really nice, yeah, and they’re our friends.”

Clay’s had it up to here with straight people, but he doesn’t let his smile drop, “Okay, cool?”

“Yeah, hot right?” Toby grins, then switches quickly to a grimace, “Not that you’d think that, I guess.”

“What?” Clay asks, and now his smile is slipping, because he may have patience and he may have played football in high school but that doesn’t mean his arm is straining with the weight of the package.

“Well, because, you and George are gay yeah?” Toby asks, and Clay can tell he thinks he’s fucked it up, “Which is totally cool, like I said, we have gay friends.”

Clay is tempted to tell the truth, set the record straight here and there. Let Toby know that him and George aren't dating, but he really can't be bothered to explain to this middle aged man who is already so set on being a mediocre ally.

"Oh, right," Clay speaks, an easy smile gracing his face, "I mean, I'm bisexual though, so I would be into that if not for the fact that objectifying lesbians is creepy as hell."

Okay, so Clay maybe can be bothered to explain things. Maybe he just likes the idea of people thinking him and George are dating more than he wants to admit to himself.

"Oh yeah, dude, sorry, of course," Toby rushes, looking more flustered by the second, "You and George are cool though, um, a cute couple. We're happy for you."

Objectively, Clay knows, this would be hilarious if he weren't in love with the man everyone thinks he's dating. Instead, the edges of want just cut a little too deep.

"Right, thanks, I'll let George know." Clay says, and hates himself a little for thriving off how uncomfortable he's managed to make Toby in a five minute conversation. It's the small wins, he thinks.

Toby nods, and with that Clay is heaving the case back into both arms and then up the stairs and through the front door. The case gets dropped straight on the floor of the hallway, it's not even for him, Clay only offered to get it for Nick in case it went out of stock.

Clay toes off his shoes, peering into the main room and frowning a little when he doesn't see George sitting up on the couch or working away at his laptop. Clay makes his way back into the hall, and takes a glance at George's closed bedroom door.

He probably shouldn't disturb George, but Toby *did* want George to know he was happy for them, and if it means Clay gets to see George curled around his duvet, hair a mess and eyes sleepy, well, that's just a bonus.

He knocks a little on George's door, but doesn't wait for a response before opening the door. George is just as Clay thought, sitting on his bed with headphones, humming along to a song Clay doesn't recognise.

"Hey." Clay says softly, walking over to perch on the end of George's unmade bed.

"Hey!" George grins back, pulling off his headphones and smiling at Clay so hard it makes Clay's lungs burn.

He's beautiful, George is so beautiful sometimes Clay forgets how to breathe. Forgets how to do anything but admire George, watch the way the Brit's eyes sparkle when he giggles, ignore the way his own eyes sting. It hurts, and Clay wonders if beauty is always bound to hurt.

"Toby downstairs wants you to know he approves of our relationship." Clay grins, laughing when George rolls his eyes.

"Oh yeah?" George smiles, "I'm glad, always nice to know our neighbours aren't homophobic."

Clay supposes that's one of the good things to come out of this.

"You know, maybe you should just tell George."

Clay snorts, sending Nick a glare from across his bedroom.

"Yeah, right, and then what when he kicks me out? Can I move in with you?"

"No dude, my mom wouldn't want you in our house." Nick smiles, pausing the game he's playing on Clay's computer to turn around and face him.

"And I'm not moving back home, so there, sorted, I won't tell George." Clay says, tone firm in finalisation.

Nick's not really someone to drop a topic easily though, "He's not gonna kick you out dumbass, if anything he'll move out of his room and into yours."

"Oh, come on," Clay scoffs, "He's not even into me, Nick."

"Hm, I'm not so sure," Nick considers, "I mean, you're over six foot, green eyes, that stupid wavy hair, what's *not* to like?"

"He can't even see my green eyes, idiot."

"Okay, that's beyond the point, Clay," Nick huffs, "The point is, George acts different around you than he does with me."

Clay can't think about that right now, can't let his mind wander to shy smiles and small hands brushing through brown hair, can't think about soft sighs when Clay brushes the back of George's arm to get past him. He *can't* .

"And how is that?" Clay pushes, because if he can't think about it, maybe Nick can.

"Like, I don't know, he'd probably do anything you asked."

Clay groans, "That's me, *I'm* the one that would do anything George asked."

"I mean, yeah," Nick laughs, "George does have you wrapped around his little finger, but like, he lets you hug him. He doesn't let me hug him."

Clay can't deny that Nick's right, George *does* let Clay wrap an arm around his shoulder, or let him ruffle his hair when they meet in the hallway. It had taken a while though. George doesn't go in for physical affection much, whilst Clay is *give, give, give* .

"He's straight anyway." Clay mumbles, hands pressed into his eyes.

"Yeah, okay," Nick chuckles, "And when has George ever spoken the words 'I'm straight' to you?"

"I mean, he hasn't said those exact words, but he's never not, so, you know."

"Jesus, you're so fucking annoying, Clay." Nick stresses, glaring at the older man.

"Hey!" Clay replies, sitting up on his bed to see Nick smiling at him, "What did I do to deserve that?"

"Your whole, 'oh boo hoo, woe is me, the man I want to fuck and put my babies in is straight' act,

when he's probably not?"

"You're talking shit, Nick." Clay glares, ignoring the way his stomach is filling with angry flames, licking the pain running through him. It's not Nick's fault.

"Literally ask him," Nick says, "You've lived with George three years and he's not once had a girlfriend, figure it out."

"He's *busy*," Clay replies, "And, I can't just go up and be like, hey George, sexuality check?"

"Coward." Nick mutters, but it's light-hearted, and then he's turning back to the game on the computer to ignore Clay's turmoil.

Clay refuses to believe he'd miss something as big as George possibly having feelings for him too. He couldn't have, all he does is think about George.

Clay thinks about George when he's walking down the street, thinks about George's hand fitting perfectly into his, thinks about George when Clay's about to go to sleep, thinks about hands scratching down his back and gasps against his neck, Clay thinks about George when he watches football, thinks of George as warm fingers messaging his aching muscles and forgets frozen hands on a car ride home.

Clay *can't* have missed it, but maybe it's worth some experimentation.

Clay sets the plan into motion the next day, fuelled only more when the middle aged couple next door to them make sure Clay knows that the church they go to is very accepting of LGBTQ people.

Really, Clay had only been trying to drop off some mail that got delivered to theirs on accident. It's sweet, Clay guesses, but it doesn't stop it being annoying.

George is doing laundry when Clay enters their apartment. The washing machine is in Clay's room, which is always a great conversation starter when people visit, so he makes his way into his bedroom and tosses his bag down on his bed before talking to George.

"Hey, you."

"Hey yourself, how was uni?" George asks, twisting his head to smile at Clay whilst he pours washing powder into the machine.

Clay shrugs, "Fine, Nick says hi, he might come over this weekend."

"Oh, cool, I feel like I haven't seen him in ages."

George is still smiling, that smaller smile that stretches his lips but doesn't quite scrunch his eyes like when he laughs, but it still makes Clay's stomach feel like there's a swarm of butterflies making their home there.

He's wearing a white t-shirt, but it's too big on him and Clay briefly wonders if George is wearing one of his shirts, and he wants to reach over and brush George's cheek like he's something precious.

George *is* something precious.

"Yeah, he misses your cute face." Clay grins, testing the waters of compliments.

George blushes, pretty pink blooming on his cheeks, and Clay feels a bit of his resolve to not reach out to him chip away.

"Oh?" George smiles, "Did Nick say that himself?"

"Weeeell," Clay grins, "You know Nick, it was more along the lines of he misses telling you that he's slept with your mom, but whatever."

George laughs, head tipped back and Clay feels like he's fighting a losing battle.

"Well, he can leave my mum out of it," George giggles, "Did the pretty part go unspoken?"

Clay pauses a little before speaking, "I guess I just wanted to tell you that you're pretty."

Clay's holding his breath now, watching as his words wash over George and paint his cheeks a deeper red. It's risky, probably, flirting so openly with George like this, but fuck it, Clay's a Leo and he's fed up of hurting every time George smiles at him.

"Stop it," George says, voice a little softer than usual, "You're so annoying."

Clay wants to push, wants to flirt and hint and *love* George until the older has no choice but to reciprocate. Love doesn't work that way though. Love *takes*. Love takes your favourite sport and turns it into crying in the locker room, love takes your best friend and turns him into the man you'd give everything up for. Clay is over having things taken from him.

"But, Georgie, you *are* pretty." Clay says, a teasing whine tinting his voice.

"Yeah, okay," George mutters, shutting the door and pressing start on the washing machine, "You want food? I have an UberEats code."

Clay wonders if George changed the subject because he's uncomfortable or because he can't take a compliment. Maybe both.

"Sure, Chinese?" Clay asks, accepting that the first flirt test is over, standing and walking out his room with George in tow.

"Mmm, yeah," George replies, grabbing his phone out his pocket to open the app, "I want noodles, what do you want?"

Clay leans against their kitchen table, menu of their local Chinese takeaway running through his head, "I could go some beef and rice, are you *just* getting noodles though?"

"Yep, not really hungry."

"You're so skinny though, Georgie."

"Oh please, you love that." George grins, looking up from his phone to smile at Clay.

Clay does love it, loves everything about George. Clay thinks he's would be perfect no matter what, but George and Nick had never let him live down the time Clay had let slip when drunk that he likes small guys, guys he can pick up and hold against a wall, guys whose necks would look so pretty with Clay's hand around them. Guys like George went unspoken.

“True.” Clay agrees, and if Nick were here he’d tell them to get a room and Clay would pretend there isn’t a stab of pain in his chest when George scoffs and shakes his head.

The stab of hurt is still there anyway, it’s always there when George looks like *that* . Teeth nibbling away at his thumb nail as he places the order, sweatpants too baggy on his legs, hair just the ride side of fluffy. It hurts to look at George and yet Clay can’t look away.

When their food arrives an hour later and George *again* chooses to slide down next to Clay on the same couch and not the spare one, the stab of pain spreads.

George never cries, Clay knows this.

George is warm rain, and beautiful giggles, and bills always paid on time, but never tears. He hadn’t even cried when they watched Marley & Me. Clay had only seen George cry once before, and that was over his final project and no sleep in two days.

But now, George is walking into their apartment, door slamming behind him and he’s *crying* . George has tear tracks down his cheeks and more building foundations in his eyes and Clay is frozen to the spot in the hallway where he’d come to see why the door slammed.

“George?” Clay tentatively says, reaching out to grab the grocery bag slipping out George’s grip.

“ *Clay*, ” George whimpers, and Clay’s whole body aches, “Sorry, I’m sorry, give me a minute.

“No, fuck, don’t be sorry,” Clay rushes, putting the bag on the ground and kicking it towards the main room, “What happened? Are you hurt?”

George shakes his head, and Clay hates his brain for thinking George still looks beautiful when he cries.

“Okay, okay,” Clay soothes, his hand resting against the small of George’s back, “Wanna go into the living room and talk?”

“Can we, can we go into my room?” George asks softly, sniffing quietly.

“Yeah, course.”

Clay keeps his hand firm on George’s back as he gently guides him into his room, shutting the door behind them and quickly switching the LED lights framing the ceilings to a soft custom blue Clay had made for George.

“Should we sit on the bed?”

George just nods in response, his hands are still clenched and Clay feels a bit of his heart break every time George chokes back a sob, squeezing his eyes shut as more tears fall.

“Sorry.” George whispers again when they’re both sat on against his headboard, blankets pulled to their waists. Clay’s moved his hand from George’s back to around his shoulder now, rubbing a soothing circle on his arm.

“Don’t be sorry, unless you’re crying because you like, murdered someone or something.” Clay grins, but the joke falls flat when all George does is sigh and push his head into Clay’s hoodie.

Clay hates this, and he hates himself for enjoying it a tiny bit to have George this close, but mostly he hates that George is crying on his shoulder and he has no idea what to do to help.

“Georgie, please, what’s wrong? I’m worried.” Clay says quietly, moving his hand to rest in George’s hair, playing softly.

“Honestly, it’s nothing,” George says, bringing his head out of Clay’s neck to face him, “Like really, just some random guy said something to me and, I don’t know, it just upset me.”

“What the fuck did someone say?” Clay scowls, and he swears to God, if someone said something to George he will go roam the streets to find them.

George rolls his eyes, but he’s stopped crying now, a small smile on his face, “You’re so stupid, you protective weirdo.”

George isn’t wrong, he’s not wrong much.

“Okay, and?” Clay asks, brushing George’s fringe out of his face, “Seriously, what did he say?”

“Literally nothing awful, I bumped into him and he just said like, get out the way you dickhead, so it’s not even bad, I just didn’t sleep much last night so, um, the crying was that too, I guess.” George explains, embarrassment coating his voice.

“That’s still fucking rude of that guy though,” Clay counters, because he doesn’t want George to feel as if he overreacted, “How come you couldn’t sleep?”

George shrugs, leaning his head back into where Clay’s hand cups it, “Just stuff on my mind.”

Yeah, Clay thinks, he knows all about that one. Knows all about sleepless nights, mind racing with thoughts of George, thoughts of laughing into kisses, thoughts of George’s head on his chest, George’s smile, thoughts of *George, George, George*.

“I’m always here to talk if you need?”

“I know,” George says softly, and he’s looking into Clay’s eyes with such appreciation that Clay knows he’s going to think about it for days, “Thanks.”

“Anytime.” Clay replies quickly, too quickly.

“Wanna watch something? Unless you’re busy.”

“Not busy,” Clay says, never too busy for you on the tip of his tongue, “As long as we get to cuddle during.”

George laughs, eyes scrunching and teeth on show, and Clay falls in love for the hundredth time that week.

“I mean, we already are.” George smiles, then wraps his arm around Clay’s chest as if to prove a point.

Clay wonders why he keeps putting himself in situations that make his emotions scream for help.

Clay thinks Nick's probably fed up with his pining, or it certainly seems that way as they chat whilst walking up the street together.

"I'm just saying, what's the worst that could happen?"

"Oh, I don't know Nick, maybe George hating me?" Clay retorts, and he's kind of fed up of Nick's lack of knowledge towards gay pining.

"Yeah, as if," Nick rolls his eyes, "You're literally his favourite person."

"I think his family may take precedence over me."

"Nuh uh, he chose to spend Christmas with you last year instead of flying to England because you didn't want to go home," Nick grins, and Clay hates that he has a point, "That's simp behaviour."

George *had* done that. It had done nothing to help Clay's feeble attempts to fall out of love with George, how could he, when the older was apologising over the phone to his mom and saying he had too much college stuff to do to come home. How could Clay not fall deeper and deeper in love when George looked at him with a wide grin and told him he was going to make the best Christmas dinner that Clay's ever had, thoughts of burnt out fires and arguments over presents long gone.

"He probably just felt sorry for me," Clay mutters, voice bordering on petulant, "George is too nice for his own good."

"Bet you'd love to know just how not nice he can be though." Nick cackles, only laughing harder as Clay shoves him out the way to open the door.

"Shut the fuck up dude, he's going to hear you." Clay hisses, and curse his fucking luck.

"Who's going to hear who?" George pipes up from the lounge, chip packets rustling in his hands as he sets down bowls of snacks.

"Oh, just me talking about how ugly you are, Gogy." Nick smiles, walking over to George and giving him a little fist bump.

George fake sighs, putting on a voice that would usually get Clay to run around the earth for him, "Claaaay, Nick's being mean to me."

Clay barely holds back a frustrated groan when George turns to face him, over exaggerated pout on show and Clay wants to kiss him to make him shut up, wants to kiss him until his pout is replaced with red bitten and spit slicked whimpers, wants to kiss him till he's sighing in pleasure instead of put on upset.

"Nick, stop being an asshole." Clay speaks, because even if George is taking the piss, he's not going to let a chance to look out for George slip through his fingers.

"Okay Clay, only because George is your small baby uwu and needs your protection." Nick laughs, and Clay wonders why he's still friends with him.

"You're just jealous." George smiles, sitting down and putting some soft music on in the

background. It's that lofi hip-hop stuff that drifts out of George's room at three am when he can't sleep, and Clay lays on his bed in pain and thinks about kissing him real slowly.

Nick sticks out his tongue at George and then makes a show of walking to the spare couch and laying down on it, leaving Clay no choice but to sit down next to George. Well, he thinks, if Nick is going to play some type of cupid, who is he to not play along?

George smiles at him when Clay sits down, his hair is still wet from a shower and he has that stupid red hoodie on that makes Clay want to pull George onto his lap and kiss him until he can't breathe.

"So, Gogy, any news?" Nick smiles, but he has a mischievous glint in his eyes, and maybe Clay should tell him to shut the hell up, "Any people on the scene?"

"Um, no," George says, a bit shy until he smiles again, turning to Nick with a smirk, "Do *you*?"

"Actually, I'll have you know, me and that girl from Tinder have a date tomorrow," Nick says, and Clay warms at the happy expression on his face, "So take that."

"Ooooh, Nick's gonna get laid." Clay singsongs, laughing when Nick blushes.

"Can't say the same for either of y'all."

Clay wheezes, head falling to the side and tipping onto George's shoulder, hands tingling when George laughs too and gently pushes Clay's head off.

"I could totally get laid if I wanted to." George replies, glare fixed on Nick but dying laughter on his lips.

"Oh yeah?" Nick snorts, "By who?"

Clay watches as George pauses a little, sliding a hand up to run along his jaw, a considering look painning his face.

"There's someone I like, but," George starts, looking more unsure by the second, "I don't know if they like me back, so, there's that."

Clay feels his heart fall *down, down, down* . Feels the crushing weight of reality press on his organs until he's left staring at George unable to speak. George likes someone. George likes someone and George is beautiful, and funny, and kind so whoever he likes will like him back and *fuck* .

Clay's going to have to watch the only person he'll ever love, love someone else.

When Nick texts him later, a message that reads, '*they, he said they, not she* ', it doesn't even do anything to lessen the water drowning Clay's body.

Clay spends the next few days moping, because he's nothing if not full of pity for himself. He feels bad, feels awful when George tentatively knocks on his door and asks if he wants food, feels horrible when he tells George no, he's busy, but then sneaks out his bedroom at midnight to make

noodles.

Clay feels so terrible about ignoring George, but what choice does he have. Clay can't so much as look in hazel brown eyes without picturing someone else calling them pretty, Clay can't sit down and eat with George without seeing George giggling with someone else, smiling as he steals a French fry. Clay can't even fucking face George.

Unfortunately, it's kind of hard to avoid someone you share a two bedroom apartment with.

It's a Monday, it's always a Monday.

Clay's walking into the kitchen, already thinking about the grilled cheese he's going to make, but George is there. George is *there*, sat on the couch, knees pulled up to his chest and arms wrapped around himself. He looks as miserable as Clay knows his own eye bags make him look.

George glances up at the sound of Clay walking into the room, shoulders falling a little when they make eye contact.

"Why the fuck have you been ignoring me?"

Okay, straight to the point, Clay thinks.

"I haven't."

It's a lie, they both know it's a lie.

"Yeah, right," George scoffs, tone cruel in a way Clay isn't used to, "Did I do something?"

Clay hates this, feels sick at the way George is looking at him, his face a mix of anger and tiredness and just a hint of the sadness that Clay's been wallowing in for the past three days.

"I, no, George, no, you didn't do anything." Clay says quietly, hands nervously fiddling with the dirty cup he'd brought with him to wash.

"Then what?" George yells, standing up and throwing his arms in the air, "I don't fucking *get* it, Clay, we were fine till Friday and then you don't speak to me for days."

Clay takes a tentative step forward, but stops when all George does is glare at him. Fuck, okay, maybe Clay's really screwed this one up. He thought he was doing the *right* thing, ignoring George so he doesn't end up confessing his love to him and ruining their friendship. Apart from, apparently that would ruin their friendship too.

"I've just been busy," Clay answers sheepishly, but he knows George is having none of it, "Or, something like that."

"Is it because I said they?"

"Huh?"

"When Nick asked if I liked someone, I said they and not she and I don't get it because you're not fucking homophobic," George breathes out, and Clay can see frustrated tears pool in his eyes, and feels more guilty than he has in his life, "But then you, I don't know, I thought you'd get it."

"Georgie?" Clay says softly, "I don't care that you said they, that would be hypocritical as fuck if I did, I'm sorry I made you think that."

And Clay is sorry, feels so awful for making George feel that way. Mind racing back to being thirteen and crying in his room, scared his parents would never forgive him.

“I didn’t think you would, but then you just haven’t spoken to me since then so, yeah.” George finishes, and his hands drop back down to his sides, looking so *tired* that Clay wants to bundle him up and make it all better.

Instead, he’s going to make it all worse.

“If I tell you something, why I was ignoring you? Will you promise not to hate me?”

Clay’s can feel his heart beating through his chest, hands sticky with sweat. He’s going to regret this.

“I couldn’t hate you.” George whispers, and Clay thinks if this is the last time he gets to see George, loving him will have been worth it.

“To protect myself, I guess,” Clay starts, and he knows he must seem nervous because George’s eyes are dancing with curiosity, “Because you like someone, and that someone’s not me, so, that kinda sucks for me.”

Clay’s holding his breath, feels like his whole life has been waiting for George’s reaction. Every scar from football practice, every girl kissed under the sun, every boy kissed in the quiet of an empty room, every glance at George when they’re watching TV, every laugh pressed into George’s head, every small grin and every meal shared.

Clay’s going to lose his everything.

“Huh?” Is George’s reaction, and Clay wonders what he did to deserve his pain being prolonged.

“I like you a lot, which sucks for me, and you I guess,” Clay says, voice watery with the hot press of tears against his eyes, “Because you like someone else, and they’re going to like you too because well, who couldn’t?”

George looks like he’s stopped breathing, standing a meter away from Clay, hands bunched up in hoodie sleeves and perfect teeth nibbling on his lip suddenly stopped. Clay’s just confessed his biggest secret, and all George is doing is *staring*.

“Georgie?” Clay asks, and he refuses to let tears spill down his cold cheeks, “Say something? Please?”

“*You’re* the someone.”

Clay feels his world come to a standstill, feels the palm trees outside stop swaying and all he knows is George. George smiling stupidly as he lets out a laugh, and Clay is still processing that he’s the someone.

“I am?”

“Yes!” George laughs, and he looks so happy now, “Yes, you idiot.”

The pain inside Clay morphs, changing shape and growing smaller and smaller until all that’s left is warm hands reaching out to cup George’s cheek.

“Oh,” Clay breathes, “You’re my someone, too.”

It's simple, Clay wonders if it were always simple with George.

It's simple, kissing George, hands in his hair, *finally*, and it's so easy for Clay to lose himself in George. Clay doesn't think he's stopped smiling since they first kissed yesterday. It's so *simple* to lead George into his bedroom, push him down on the soft mattress and giggle with him until laughs turn into moans and moans turn into whispered praise.

It's two in the morning, and it's a Tuesday, and George's head is resting on Clay's chest and Clay knows he's loved George since his heart took it's first beat.

"What're you thinking about?" George mumbles, lifting his head to gaze into Clay's eyes.

"You." Clay answers simply, it's always simple and it's always you.

"What about me?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Clay grins, pressing a kiss into George's hair.

"Yeah," George giggles, leaning his head up to press a kiss onto the taller's nose, "Tell me."

"I just feel really lucky, I guess," Clay begins, "I never expected this, I thought I'd just be staring after you forever, always a few steps behind."

"Nah," George dismisses, eyes crinkling with a smile, "You're right by my side, idiot."

"Forever?" Clay asks, and it's too soon, far too soon to be making promises of forever and words that sound suspiciously like *love, love, love*.

"Forever."

Clay had forgotten about the neighbour thing when it happened next. It's easy to forget when you spend a week wrapped up in your boyfriend in your co-curated bubble of happiness.

He's with George this time, and they're hand in hand walking up the stairs. George's hand fits into Clay's like it was made to be there. Clay always knew it would. So really, in their neighbours defence, they do have it right this time.

"Clay! George!" The old lady from number three calls out, the one who started it all, "Sweethearts, I hadn't seen y'all forever!"

"Hey, Mrs. Anderson," George says politely, and Clay wonders if it's too far of him to fawn over it, "How have you been?"

"Great, thank you," She smiles, and Clay feels warmth travel through him when George squeezes

his hand, “I got you both a little present.”

“Oh,” Clay says, “You really didn’t have to.”

“Nonsense,” Mrs. Anderson waves, “let me just pop in and get it.”

Clay nods, and he knows it’s going to be some cliché ‘I Love My Gay Neighbours!’ photo frame, and he can’t stop the snort escaping his throat.

“Don’t be fucking rude, Clay.” George says, but he’s smiling and leaning up on his tiptoes to press a soft kiss to Clay’s lips.

Clay laughs, and grabs the back of George’s head when the smaller goes to pull away from the kiss, and kisses George properly, probably *too* properly for the middle of the communal hall. But how can Clay not want to mould his lips to Georges, run his tongue along teeth, whenever possible when he feels like he’s waited a lifetime.

“Oh, sorry boys.”

“Shit, sorry.” Clay says, pulling away from George and trying not to laugh when Mrs. Anderson smiles at George’s embarrassed blush.

“No, it’s fine! I remember what it’s like to be young and in love,” She reminisces, smile still firm, “Here’s the gift, I saw it in Target and thought of you both.”

In her hands, are two tiny cactuses in a shared pot with a miniature pride flag sticking out of the soil. Okay, so it’s very cute and thoughtful and when Nick asks, Clay will deny the tears in his eyes.

Later, when George carefully places the cacti on their windowsill and turns to Clay with a smile brighter than anyone deserves to see, Clay never thinks he’ll have cold hands again.

End Notes

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